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What the Small Town may do for Itself

BY

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WHAT THE SMALL TOWN MAY DO FOR ITSELF.

By Charles Knowles Bolton.

AS we drive through our beautiful New England towns which lie among the hills and along the wooded streams, it is difficult to believe that these peaceful homes produce more murderers in proportion to the number of inhabitants than our largest cities. Yet this is the case. Where an angry word is the chief event of a month, it assumes a magnitude it could never have in the life of a man surrounded by his fellows. Solitude gives too much occasion for self-analysis and for brooding over one's misfortunes and one's grievances. Robinson Crusoe's safety lay in his mental activity; and it is his example in this that is needed in our country towns. One hundred years ago the isolated farmer spent his winters as a cordwainer, a broom-maker, or a cooper. But the cities have absorbed these industries and the farmer too often passes the long months almost in idleness.

The most important step in behalf of the country town is perhaps the establishment of the public library. There are now very few Massachusetts towns without public libraries. New Hampshire makes it compulsory for her towns to establish libraries; and other states will not be far behind her. Where there is a state board of library commissioners with power to direct and aid in establishing town libraries, there certainly should be some one in a place public-spirited enough to claim this assistance. The library—no longer a retreat for degenerates—will then become the intellectual and social centre of the village. It should have books for serious study and for light reading; it should have a room for exhibitions, lectures and concerts, and another for children. More than all, it should have a conversation room with an open fireplace. It is a rare New England town which is not the birthplace of some man wealthy enough and willing (if properly approached) to give such a library building.

From the library the young people will draw material for a live debating society, the older people material for literary and art clubs. There is nothing discussed in Paris, London, New York or Boston which the smallest public library may not know about in a fortnight.

The public schools are now fostering a method of study popularly known as coördination. The history, the political science, the art, the poetry of a country grow side by side; more than that, they are interdependent for this growth, and in studying these subjects at the same time children are unravelling the strands of a national fabric. The vitalizing force in this method is, in part, the interest which is awakened in local conditions. When a lady offered a prize for the best essays on the first soldier of Brookline, Mass., killed in the Revolution, it seemed hardly possible that Irish boys of twelve could grasp the subject. One of the most creditable efforts, however, was a composition written and illustrated by an Irish boy. For the early traits of his hero the boy drew upon the story of Washington, and for his illustration of the soldier drilling before the old orthodox church (long ago torn down) he sketched his own familiar Catholic church. He had the right idea; and the Revolution will always remain associated in his mind with his own town.

In the high school a study of national and municipal needs widens and intensifies the interests of every

scholar. The master of the school discusses each local problem as it arises, and takes both boys and girls to the town meetings, that they may see the same problems argued and voted upon for the final good or hurt of the town itself. In preparing for this, the previous development and cost of maintenance of the various departments of schools, police, lighting, street cleaning and watering, etc., are tabulated by the students, who then attempt to explain the fluctuations which appear on these graphic charts. In their debating society, an evening in each year is given to a mock session of some representative body, the city council, the state senate, or the national upper house. These are an educational force as well as a source of entertainment to the whole community.

From this same progressive spirit has grown the high school paper, which has printed not only the essays and verses of the students, but also a series of papers by a well known graduate, an historical sketch of the school and its alumni by a former master, and an interesting local diary, edited very ably with explanatory notes.

As an outcome of this fostering of local interest two prizes for original investigation in local history are now offered each year by a citizen to the senior class in the high school. It has been a surprise to see how much that is new and permanent in value may be gathered together by young people who have had no special training but are spurred on by the novelty of a fresh task. The last year has witnessed the rescue from oblivion of a number of quaint anecdotes of the Revolutionary period. And the store of data gathered from rare and unfamiliar books or papers seems unending. For example, the career of a Continental soldier who was a credit to the town has been thoroughly brought to light, even to the details of his daily habits, in the face of the statement made by a local historian that "nothing could be found about him." This year the stories of our men in the Civil War will be collected.

Some of us wondered how these essays could be printed, both for safe keeping and for the benefit of other towns. An historical society often does little more than print addresses of the presidents and obituaries of the members. In such a company the essays would have been lost sight of, or would have been sent down to posterity burdened with emendations by the members.

At last the following prospectus was drawn up and printed:

"*The Brookline Historical Publication Society.*

"The Brookline Historical Publication Society is organized to collect and print in a uniform series such manuscripts and material not readily accessible as shall seem worthy of permanent preservation.

"There shall be a Publication Committee of three to decide upon all matters suggested by the aims of the Society.

"The object of membership is to provide funds to carry on the work of the Society, and each subscriber of the annual fee of one dollar ($1.00) will receive free all publications of the Society.

MISS ——— ———
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Standing Publication Committee.

"N. B. Subscriptions may be sent at once to the Treasurer at the Public Library."

It may be noted that there are no officers, no elections, no meetings and no rules. What has been the result? Subscriptions have come in so rapidly that we shall print during the first year four "publications" besides the prize essay which alone it was our first intention to issue. Those already printed are: A letter written in 1810 by Rebecca Boylston to her uncle, telling of changes in the town, and of her engagement; the Sharp family papers; and Brookline in the Revolution. The church records, the graveyard inscriptions and collections of wills, deeds, etc., will follow.

Every town has its letters and its diaries which should be preserved. One lady whom I approached for papers declared that she had nothing

of value. After some patient questioning I secured a package of deeds and wills; of these thirteen were dated prior to the year 1700, one of them only thirty years after the coming of the "Mayflower." The autographs of Governors Shirley, Bellingham and Dudley gave them the dignity of history.

Our society was started with an outlay of about six dollars for circulars and envelopes, besides six hundred one-cent stamps. Each publication of eight pages costs ten dollars for three hundred copies, and a dollar for each one hundred copies extra. A bookseller assures us that when we have enough numbers to make a volume, with title-page and index, he will be able to add to our treasury by further sales.

In looking about for support it should be kept in mind that "newcomers" are as ready to aid such an enterprise as the members of old families. The dollar, like the prey of the hunter, often lurks in unexpected places.

The result, and to some extent the aim, of intensifying the interest of young people through giving their work a local application, has been an awakening of parents. To secure their more active coöperation with teachers, and to unite every interest which could increase the intellectual activity of the community, the superintendent of schools initiated the movement which has resulted in the formation of the Brookline Education Society, with its five hundred members. Already the possibility of a common meeting ground has been found of immense advantage for a better understanding of aims and standards, as well as for the discussion of such questions as proper hygienic conditions, recreation and sleep, with the parents themselves. A closer and better relation between parents and teachers has followed the growing affection and respect between teachers and scholars.

During the present winter a course of afternoon historical lectures is being delivered at the high school, open not only to the high school pupils, but to those of the upper grades of the grammar schools. Local history and the Civil War furnish the themes.

All these efforts, it will be noticed, have more or less directly served to bind together an increasing number of people, through appealing to their local and social interests. And any methods which do this successfully, especially in our smaller towns, help to produce a healthier and happier community. Brookline is, of course, a peculiarly circumstanced town, there are few where these things could have been started so easily. But, the way once pointed out, there are not many important towns where work like this cannot be done; and there is no town so small or poor that it could not undertake modest things in such directions. Could anything be better to help our country towns to a serious, worthy and entertaining intellectual life?

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